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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric is being called upon or invoked by theorists in a number of fields, including English and composition studies, and it has the potential for offering a site (as it has in moments in its past) for a genuinely interdisciplinary, critical theory and practice that would remove conceptions of literacy from the margins and place them at the center of cultural debate. But the representation of rhetoric offered by these theorists is often partial and incomplete. Those calling for an epistemological revolution or interpretive turn have played an important role in enabling rhetoric to "get out from under" its historical domination by philosophy, but they deny rhetoric's own traditional commitment to a fully situated understanding of discourse when they downplay all other features except textuality. Those in composition studies, grounded as they are in rhetorical theory yet engaged with the tough day-to-day concerns of literacy, are well situated to contribute to this theoretical effort. (Eighteen references are attached.) (RS)

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WHAT ARE THEY SAYING ABOUT RHETORIC--AND WHY?
RHETORIC AND POSTMODERN THEORY

"Something momentous has happened in the field of rhetoric, and Clifford Geertz is partly to blame." Thus Richard Schweder begins his review of anthropologist Clifford Geertz's recent book, Works and Lives: The Anthropoligist as Author, in the February 28, 1988 issue of the New York Times Book Review. Schweder goes on to comment that "the old rhetoric has become the new rhetoric and it is no longer `mere' rhetoric" (p. 13).

Something momentous may indeed be happening in (or to) rhetoric. As recently as the mid 1970s--and perhaps even later--most scholars in the humanities (and certainly those in the social sciences) would have applauded I. A. Richards' 1936 condemnation of rhetoric as "the dreariest and least profitable part of the waste that the unfortunate travel through in Freshman English" (3). During the last ten years, however, rhetoric has become relevant not just to a few rhetorical scholars isolated in departments of speech communication or English. Rather, scholars in a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have found that rhetoric suddenly, in Richards' terms, "minister(s) to important needs" (3).

In our presentations today Suzanne, Bob, and I want to comment upon some of the ways in which rhetoric currently is--or might be--invoked and applied in the humanities and social sciences. We also hope to suggest how those of us whose work is grounded in rhetorical studies might profit from the kind of

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theoretical interrogation currently underway in postmodern theory. Even though we will be giving separate papers, our presentations have evolved in part through a series of informal discussions held around dining and livingroom tables in Corvallis; we hope that our talks will reflect the collaborative context of these discussions.

What first caused me to wonder "What Are They Saying about Rhetoric--and Why?" I first asked this question in the context of literary studies. Terry Eagleton and Paul de Man have each invoked and privileged rhetoric, for example. In Literary Theory: An Introduction, Eagleton concludes his discussion by calling for a return to rhetoric, which he describes as the discipline that considers "speaking and writing not merely as textual objects, to be aesthetically contemplated or endlessly deconstructed, but as forms of activity inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences, and as largely unintelligible outside the social purposes and conditions in which they were embedded" (206). Paul de Man shares Eagleton's concern for the importance of rhetoric in postmodern theory--if not his definition of rhetoric. De Man's Allegories of Reading explores rhetoric as a "problematics of reading. . . .[in which] rhetoric is a disruptive intertwining of trope and persuasion" (ix).

Confronted with such different representations (and applications) of rhetoric, I found myself wondering if rhetoric can, and perhaps should, prove sufficiently elastic to meet the

needs of theoreticians with such diverse projects.

My interest in this question expanded to include studies in other disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, law, and philosophy. (I don't want to mislead you; my research in these areas has been anything but systematic and exhaustive.) As I read about conferences with titles like "The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences" and searched for (and sometimes even found the time to read) such articles and books as Christopher Norris' The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy, James Boyd White's Heracles' Bow: Essays on the Rhetoric and Poetics of Law, Donald McCloskey's The Rhetoric of Economics, and Richard Brown's "Theories of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Theories: Toward a Political Phenomenology of Sociological Truth," I found my single question multiplying into a number of questions:

> What has catalyzed this reassessment of rhetoric's nature and significance?
>
> How can scholars with such diverse approaches as Eagleton and de Man (to cite the previously mentioned example) both find rhetoric heuristically satisfying?
>
> Is it possible, in the context of such diverse scholarly projects and methodologies, to locate a shared general meaning for rhetoric as it is invoked and applied by those in the humanities and social sciences? (And if not, does it matter?)
>
> What role does--and should--rhetoric play in postmodern theory? (And what role should postmodern theory play in rhetorical studies?)

And, finally,

> What are the implications of this reawakening of interest in rhetoric for traditional rhetorical studies and for the comp-lit streetfight in departments of English?

At the risk of oversimplifying, I would like to categorize recent reawakenings of interest in rhetoric as reflecting two broad impulses. The first of these has sometimes been characterized as a "turn to interpretation" or "epistemological revolution." This turn or revolution is reflected by the effort radically to question, in Richard Rorty's terms, "Descartes's attempt to make the world safe for clear and distinct ideas and Kant's to make it safe for synthetic a priori truths" (165). Opposing foundationalist projects which endeavor to locate universal laws of reason, a number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have rejected what Louise Phelps in Composition as A Human Science calls the "scientismic" or positivist assumption that "the explanatory method used by natural sciences should be the model for intelligibility in all cases where humans attempt to develop valid knowledge" (7). Instead, they have looked to phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Husseral and hermeneuticists such as Gadamer to develop a new "understanding of understanding" (Geertz, Local Knowledge, p. 5). Those guided by a hermeneutical, contextualist, constructivist, or intersubjectivist vision of knowledge--these terms have all been used to describe the broad epistemological revolution I have been describing--establish discourse as both master trope and subject of investigation and view reason as essentially rhetorical (even though not all use the word "rhetoric" to describe this new understanding.)

Such a revisioning inevitably challenges scholars to

redefine their discipline's goals and methods. Clifford Geertz comments on the consequences of such a transforming perspective in the introduction to Local Knowledge:

> To turn from trying to explain social phenomena by weaving them into grand textures of cause and effect to trying to explain them by placing them in local frames of awareness is to exchange a set of well-charted difficulties for a set of largely uncharted ones. Dispassion, generality, and empirical groundings are earmarks of any science worth the name, as is logical force. Those who take the determinative [or positivist] approach seek these elusive virtues by positing a radical distinction between description and evaluation and then confining themselves to the descriptive side of it; but those who take the hermeneutic [approach], denying the distinction [between description or evaluation] or finding themselves somehow astride it, are barred from so brisk a strategy. (p. 6)

Dominick LaCapra raises similar issues in "Rhetoric and History" (History and Criticism), where he asks: "How may the necessary components of a documentary model without which historiography would be unrecognizable be conjoined with rhetorical features in a broader, interactive understanding of historical discourse?" (p. 35). LaCapra's subsequent discussion emphasizes the overdetermined nature of the turn to interpretation or epistemological revolution which has affected research in his own and other disciplines. Looking at his own field, LaCapra cites the following factors as challenging history's traditional disciplinary model:

> An inclination to rely on a social definition of context as an explanatory matrix; a shift toward an interest in popular culture; a reconceptualization of culture in terms of collective discourses, mentalities, world views, and even 'languages'; a redefinition of intellectual history as the study of social meanings as historically constituted; and archivally based

> documentary realism that treats artifacts as quarries for facts in the reconstitution of societies and cultures of the past. (p. 46)

The second broad impulse that has led to a reawakening of interest of rhetoric grows not out of philosophical concerns but from efforts to reemphasize or resituate history, politics, and ideology in contemporary theory. Marxists, postmarxists, new historicists, and others argue that theories of discourse must recognize the political, historical, and ideological situatedness of language. This recognition is indeed often, though by no means always, absent from discussions such as those I have just mentioned. In her preface to Composition as a Human Science, a work grounded in hermeneutical and contextualist philosophical and psychological theories, for example, Louise Phelps recognizes that her study fails to address "the problem of power. . .If rhetoric is a set of relations among language, power, and knowledge, I have neglected power and the political dimension of composition and its praxis."

Scholars in composition studies are not the only theorists to avoid confronting issues of politics, history, and ideology. This is a major criticism, of course, of deconstructionists like de Man, who invokes rhetoric but limits its scope, many would argue, by defining it as "the study of tropes and figures" ("Semiology and Rhetoric," 125). The twenty-year old rhetoric as epistemic movement in speech communication has focused so directly on charges that it encourages a dangerous relativism that theorists have yet to recognize that the world that rhetoric

constructs is not necessarily a place of happy consensus but of political and ideological conflict. Advocates of writing as a social process in composition studies have been accused of a similar naivete', as in Greg Myers' and my own critiques of Kenneth Bruffee's collaborative learning theories.

In describing the first interpretive or epistemological turn toward rhetoric, I was able to cite a number of theorists, such as Geertz, La Capra, and McCloskey, who with varying degrees of explicitness invoke rhetoric as a means of clarifying or situating their projects. The same is not true for this second historical/political/ideological turn. As Bob will note in his talk today, Terry Eagleton is the only Marxist who has explicitly identified links between Marxist theory and rhetoric--yet there are potent if as yet unarticulated connections between recent rethinkings of the concept of ideology and rhetoric. In his 1984 Studies in the Theory of Ideology, for example, John Thompson in a chapter on "Theories of Ideology and Methods of Discourse Analysis" implicitly calls for rhetoric as a means of developing a theory of ideology. Yet Thompson never makes the connection and instead remains frustrated in his effort to mediate between philosophical and linguistic approaches to language:

> . . .it seems increasingly clear that the study of language must occupy a privileged position in any . . .analysis [of ideology]. The analysis of ideology is, in a fundamental respect, the study of language in the social world. . .The recognition of this close connection between the theory of ideology and the study of language has offered the possibility of linking the analysis of ideology to forms of philosophy which have focused on the nature of language and meaning, on the one hand, and to forms of linguistics which have been

> applied to literary texts and social interaction, on the other. The task of accounting for the phenomenon of ideology has called for, and seems to require, an integrated approach to the nature and analysis of language in the social world. (p. 73)
>
> While the desiderata seem clear [Thompson goes on to note], the results have so far been disappointing (p. 73).

Bakhtin also argues for a diologics that views language not just as epistemic but as (in a very Burkean sense) action--action that involves not just cooperation but competition, not just identification but division. In describing the word as a "territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interloculer," Bakhtin calls, as Clark and Holquist note, for "a politics of representation" (15). This "territorial concept of the word" also implicitly calls for (or is consistent with) a rhetorically grounded understanding of discourse.

Although I am just beginning, with Bob's, Suzanne's, and other's help, to educate myself about this second political/historical/ideological turn, I would like to speculate here that this research could play a particularly important role in helping to articulate a postmodern theory of rhetoric, one that is grounded in rhetoric's rich tradition yet open to the challenges and contributions of leftist and feminist critiques. As Jim Merod reminds us in The Political Responsibility of the Critic, humanist critics have characteristically drawn a "radical separation . . .between the `literary' and the `imaginative' on one side and the political and institutional world. . .on the other" (9-10). To the extent that epistemologically-oriented

critics maintain this separation, they may remain locked (often against their intentions or wishes) in traditional humanism. Micaela di Leonardo's comment in a recent review in The Nation of Geertz' Works and Lives may apply to other theorists as well. Di Leonardo notes of Geertz and other "ethnography as text" scholars: ". . .if we cannot escape the cultural [and thus textual] construction of reality, no more can we escape its sensuous material dimension. . . .[or] our political and economic placement at home" (352). Theorists who insist on constructing a one-dimensional textual world risk what di Leonardo calls "idealist purblindness" (352).

With just a few moments left, you may wonder, as I (with Burke looking over my shoulder) do: "Where are we now?" I would argue that rhetoric is situated at a crucial moment in its history. Rhetoric is being called upon or invoked by theorists in a number of fields, including English and composition studies, and it has the potential for offering a site (as it has in moments in its past) for a genuinely interdisplinary, critical theory and practice--a theory and practice that would, for instance, remove conceptions of literacy from the margins (where functional literates are supposed to reside, next to the homeless) and place them at the center of cultural debate. But the representation of rhetoric offered by these theorists is often partial and incomplete.

Those calling for an epistemological revolution or interpretive turn have played an important role in enabling

rhetoric to "get out from under" its historical domination by philosophy. But to the extent that these theorists ignore or downplay all other features of our situation but textuality, they deny rhetoric's own traditional commitment to a fully situated, and even committed, understanding of discourse. Forging the kinds of explicit connections that I am suggesting--and that Suzanne and Bob will also discuss in their talks--is a considerable task. Those of us in composition studies who are grounded in rhetorical theory yet engaged with the tough day-to-day concerns of literacy are well situated, I believe, to contribute to this important theoretical effort.

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